

Academics as a Profession: What does it Mean? Does it Matter?

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INTRODUCTION

The Carnegie Foundation survey (1993) on the professoriate takes for granted that university professors make a distinctive profession. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption, shared by a growing literature. But what does it mean to say that professors are a profession? Is this concept more than a statistical or administrative classification? How important is it to know whether academics are truly a profession, in general and in specific contexts? The contention of this presentation is that, indeed, to be or not to be a profession is much more than a formal classification, and has important consequences in terms of how universities are organized and work.

WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

A profession is a group of people who share a similar occupation, a common basis of knowledge and skills, and a distinctive standing in society. They are also supposed to share a common set of values, including the pride in their competence and standing, and the desire to keep their occupation under autonomous control and supervision. Professionals are proud of the services they provide, but do not like to see themselves as hirelings, selling their services to the higher bid, and catering to the desires of their clients. They prefer to see themselves as working for a noble cause (the causes of knowledge, health, justice, peace), and expect to receive the proper acknowledgement and financial compensations for their dedication. Professions are assumed to be the best institutions for the preservation and development of technical traditions, the stimulation of creativity and competence, the protection of society against quackery, and the defence of the professionals' own lifestyles.

This ideal type of a profession, which has its origins in the medieval cities, where the first universities also appeared, has gone through important transformations and adaptations. There are at least three very different types of profession today, and we should ask ourselves to which the academic profession belongs.

The first is the liberal profession, best represented by the independent, free-standing medical doctor. He works autonomously, decides what his clients need and how much they should pay, and is only limited by the norms and ethics of his equals. His status is based on the specialized knowledge and academic credentials he has acquired through an extended process of education and professional initiation, controlled by his elder colleagues. The rituals of initiation and graduation are supposed to guarantee and acknowledge his competence, and make sure that no one without the proper credentials and qualifications should offer their services to society.

The second is the unionized skilled worker, which is the direct heir of the medieval guilds. Until the recent past, craftsmanship was transmitted from father to son, or from master to pupil, and the guild's control of professional initiation and professional practice was similar to that of the liberal professions of today. The craft professions were affected, however, by two important trends. The monopoly they retained on their specialized skills was eroded by the introduction of modern machinery, the division of labour of modern industrial production, and the development of organized technical training. Moreover, the introduction of large-scale industrial employment made the independent craftsman and his family enterprise a thing of the past. The skilled workers lost two of the main elements of a classic profession: the monopoly and control of

specialized knowledge, and professional independence. They developed the ability to organize and negotiate their salaries and working conditions with their employers and governments, and often joined political parties to influence society as a whole. In countries with a strong craft tradition, unions tended to get organized along professional lines, and retained some of the tradition, culture and shared abilities of the past. The term 'profession', however, in many societies, migrated from the craftsmen to those with a university education, to characterize what are known today as the 'learned professions'.

The third type is the civil servant in the modern bureaucracies, well educated in the schools of law, the military academies and in high prestige, public institutions, such as the French École Polytechnique or the Tokyo University. Rituals of admission and professional practice are strongly enforced, both for education and for professional practice. Like the liberal professional, the civil servant keeps the pride and the prestige of a learned profession; but, like the unionized worker, he is not free to decide his career, which has to follow the general rules and procedures of the central authorities. He shares with the other two, however, the professional identity and the *esprit de corps* which allows him to negotiate the terms and conditions of his work, which includes the control of the initiation mechanisms and educational procedures for admission to his trade. He is, to use Fritz Ringer's image (1969), the modern version of the Chinese mandarin.

SCHOLARS AND MANDARINS

Depending on the country and the historical time, the academic profession has taken different elements of these three ideal types. In centralized societies such as Prussia and France, and in Europe more generally, the university professor has been a member of the civil service, like a judge or a military officer. Dispersed among different specialties, the academics did not share a common knowledge basis, but had in common the values of science, education, scholarship and, more generally, the culture obtained through a highly selective system of secondary education. They were perceived, to use Harold Perkin's expression (1987), as the key profession, responsible for setting the standards and imparting the fundamental knowledge required by the other learned professions. To do this, they had to place themselves at the very source of knowledge production, as researchers and scholars, from which their work as educators should result.

This was the ideal of the Humboldtian university, which became the model to be emulated in other countries since the nineteenth century. However, comparative studies showed that beyond the similar facade of a state-supported, homogeneous academic profession, there were differences that explained the professional and scientific achievements of academics in different countries. Joseph Ben-David (1977) argued that the success of the German university depended not on its organization as a coherent body of the civil service, but on the competition that existed among universities for the best academics and researchers, and, one may add, on the special links that German universities established with industry, particularly in chemistry. In this, the German academic worked more like a free-standing, independent intellectual, than as a member of a fixed and well-established corporation. Fritz Ringer's thesis can be construed as the opposite side of the same argument: because the German academic was also a mandarin, he was led to place the values of hierarchy, authority and nation above those of

individuality and freedom, and contributed, in his own way, to the downfall of Germany into authoritarianism. A side-note on this apparent contradiction is that, while Ben-David was mostly concerned with the development of the natural sciences, Ringer's attention was drawn to philosophy, history and the social sciences, which provided the cornerstone of the German ideologies.

One could look for parallels, contrasts and tensions between the 'mandarin' and the 'free standing' academic in other higher education systems and societies, and probably would come to similar conclusions. Whenever the institutions allowed the academics to see themselves as members of a scientific community, free to move between institutions and even countries, their effective involvement with actual research was higher, and the quality of the education they provided was better. One of the first results of the Carnegie comparative study is that, today, academics see themselves above all as members of their academic discipline, and do not give much importance to their institutional affiliation. This is particularly striking in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Japan, Israel and Korea, and less accentuated in Brazil and Mexico, where the academic roles of researcher and scholar are not as clearly established. The impressive achievements of American higher education and research can be attributed, in part, to the almost total absence of the 'mandarin', notwithstanding the ascendancy of the Ivy League, and to the intense mobility of their academics. It is paradoxical that in Europe, and in most countries that copied the European model, higher education remained much closer to the standards of the civil service and the values of the mandarin than their experience would recommend.

ACADEMIES AND UNIONS

The opposition depicted above between the academic and the mandarin is just one dimension in a much more complex pattern of organization of academic work. University professors have a teaching job to do, and, as higher education increased its reach, it became more relevant for more people, and more expensive for government and society in most countries and this is truer for large than for small societies – it became more differentiated, with different people looking for different types of education. Some students still yearn for the learned professions, but many are only looking for practical training for a specialized job, wanting to improve their general education, or simply following the educational path of their cohort. The socialization of academics through a common secondary education, or at least a uniform state examination, became also more difficult to maintain and justify. In many cases, academics still see themselves as members of a learned profession, based on the values of research and scholarship. As often as not, however, they are just employees in large institutions, with a job to do and a salary to earn at the end of the month. Their motivation and values may lie elsewhere. Instead of a life-long career, their passage through the academy may be temporary, and, even if it is not, they may be more committed to their specific profession than to the university and its values.

This is the breeding ground for a new type of academic, who is much closer to the professional unions than to the learned professions. They work for large organizations, very often controlled by a centralized ministry, who have to account for the proper use of public resources and the delivery of education services in appropriate quantity and time. They respond in kind, getting organized in professional unions, to guarantee their salaries, working conditions and benefits. On both sides, there is a strong pressure towards uniform standards and procedures, due process, and clear rules for admission, promotion and payment. Squeezed between the two is the traditional academic, who prizes above all his individuality and independence. He reacts by stressing his links with the international and the scientific community, reducing the involvement with his institution, and looks for support among the science financing agencies. By the same token, he avoids teaching, and more specially undergraduate teaching. He sees his profession as losing prestige, his institution as losing autonomy, and his personal intellectual freedom, to decide what to teach and to do, curtailed. We can observe this pattern in one of the countries in the

Carnegie Foundation study, Brazil, where the middle ranks in the academic career join the unions, while the higher ranks give preference to their academic affiliations. There is also a third group, at the lower ranks, who is not, in fact, a member of the profession. His academic credentials are limited, he does not have a regular working contract, and his personal involvement, whether with the academy or the professional unions, is minimal.

Table 1: *Union and academic affiliations*

| | Under-graduate | Special-ization | MA degree | Doctoral degree | Full professor |
|---|----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|----------------|
| a) Membership in 2 or more academic associations: | | | | | |
| In the country | 24.9% | 38.0% | 48.4% | 65.4% | 71.8% |
| International | 1.1 | 2.2 | 3.7 | 17.5 | 22.2 |
| b) Attendance at 2 or more academic meetings in the last three years: | | | | | |
| In Brazil | 42.6 | 61.0 | 73.0 | 83.6 | 9-.0 |
| Abroad | 2.2 | 3.2 | 5.8 | 16.0 | 17.1 |
| c) Participation in union activities: | | | | | |
| Active participation | 6.4 | 10.4 | 19.6 | 9.2 | 7.6 |

STAFF ISSUES AND THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION

It is curious how the concept of 'staff', of common use in administration, is now entering the field of higher education. Its managerial connotations are unmistakable. Universities are not, any longer, just the home of scientists, the place of educators or the breeding ground of the élite. They are organizations that have to deliver an efficient service, and, for that, have to get and administer the appropriate manpower, the staff.

That this staff belongs to a profession, in one (or a combination) of its different versions, is both unavoidable and essential to take into account, if the managerial task is to succeed. Different countries and institutions have tried to solve and improve their staffing needs through attempts to foster one of the professional alternatives described above. In many cases, there is an effort to move higher education in the direction of the free-standing liberal professions. Institutions are set free to look for their clients, professors are stimulated to get their own sources of money and profit for them, and competitiveness for resources, prestige and influence is fostered. The proclaimed benefits of this orientation are well known; less clear, however, is the cost they bring in terms of the alienation and conflicts with those that cannot compete, or who perceive their social standing as something beyond the mundane dispute for projects, contracts and evaluation points.

The other strategy is to insist on the universities as a distinguished branch of the civil service. This leads to a stress on well structured career patterns, public entrance examinations to the profession, job stability, and reverence bestowed on the academic chair and the professor. The ability to carry on such strategy depends on the country's size and cultural traditions; it is more appropriate to small and well educated European countries, for instance, than to large and heterogenous societies elsewhere. One problem with this approach is that, even in the best of circumstances, it is very conservative, since there is no stimulus for the professor to change and adapt to new circumstances, and no flexibility for the institutions to do likewise.

The third strategy is to see the universities as one among many modern companies in society, and treat the academics as companies do their workers. If the workers are unionized, they have to learn to deal with it. These learned companies will tend to organize the professor's work according to clear rules related to working loads, well defined working schedules and explicit productivity targets. If there is enough flexibility, they can even adjust benefits to measures

of performance. The danger in this approach is that it threatens one of the central elements of a profession, which is the autonomy to decide what to do and how to proceed, and take a personal responsibility for it. Well managed teaching companies can be just that – well managed teaching companies – and lack the dimensions of prestige, intellectual leadership and role models which are essential elements of the academic profession.

CONCLUSION

The three alternatives for the professionalization of academics – the liberal professional, the mandarin and the union member – define the space in which the modern universities have to move. They are related to three different ways of managing higher education institutions – like professional markets, the civil service or service companies. Each of these alternatives has its rationale, and its adoption depends, in large part, on the cultural and academic traditions of each society. Academic markets stimulate competitiveness and achievement; the civil service guarantees stability, competence and prestige; and modern management assures effectiveness and good service. There are no ready-made formulae for good

university management, except that, in all cases, there should be a combination of the three elements, depending on how the academic profession is shaped in a given context, and to where one would expect it to move.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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